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SUBJECT: CAMEL REARING AS NORWAY'S NEW INTEGRATION TOOL?

1. On January 4, Norway's newspaper readers woke to find a story about the local community of Loeten in southeastern Norway which has asked for government support to help establish a local camel rearing industry. Loeten has several immigrants of East African origin (mostly Somali refugees) who are having difficulty integrating into Norwegian society and finding work. According to Wenche Irene Stenseth, settlement officer for refugees in Loeten, the point behind the project is to create jobs that provide refugees with self-respect and pride by focusing on their own knowledge and interest. The Loeten community is asking the central government for a grant of about USD 150 thousand (NOK 1 million) to start an initial production of camel products (milk, meat, wool, leather) with 20 imported animals. Stenseth points out that camel milk has an especially low lactose content and also contains insulin, and she hopes that the Loeten idea can generate interest elsewhere in Norway.

2. The newspapers report that several of the immigrants in Loeten are enthusiastic about the idea, despite the raised eyebrows of some in the local community, an agricultural area with significant dairy and horse farms. Norway's food and animal inspection service (Mattilsynet) is also highly skeptical. Mattilsynet's regional director Eivind Liven points out to the press that the importation of exotic animals is forbidden in Norway, and that Mattilsynet would need to see a very special requirement before it would allow an exception to the rule, and allow camels to be imported to Norway as domestic animals.

3. Comment: While the fun factor of the Loeten community's initiative is high, it does underline just how difficult Norway finds it to integrate asylum seekers and refugees into Norwegian society. Norway is extremely homogenous, and the government's nationwide resettlement distribution policy means that many immigrants find themselves stuck in small communities with no reasonable prospects for integration into tightly knit, closed societies. Loeten's out of the box thinking may come to nothing, but this small community is at least seeking a creative solution to integration at the local level, even as the Norwegian government struggles to come to terms with the challenges posed by integration nationally.

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